

A Brief History and Sanskriti (Culture?) of Braj-Bhoomi (the Land of Braj-Vrindavan/the Land of Radha-Krishna)

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Introduction:

*If I am to be a man, then let me, Rasakhan,
live as a cowherd in the village of Gokul.*

*If I am to be an animal, then let me live
always gazing among the cows of Nanda.*

*If I am to be a rock, then let me be one
upon the very hill that Krishna used
as an umbrella against Indra's storm.*

*If I am to be a bird, then let me live
In the branches of a kadamba tree*

on the banks of the Yamuna River. [1]

Rasakhan (16th Century)
(Great Muslim poet and
Devotee of Krishna)

This paper and lecture is aimed at to explore in brief some key historical events as well as some uniquely significant dharmic (religious?), philosophical and sanskritic (cultural?) aspects of the geographical region of India known as Brajbhoomi or the Land of Radha-Krishna. This paper

does not address other important historical aspects such as development of science and technology, dwellings, foods, clothing, numismatics, archeology, languages and literatures epigraphy, art and iconography, agriculture and gardening, social and economic, and political structure and governance. The city of Mathura in the state of Uttar Pradesh- a nucleus of Brajbhoomi- has been one of the most ancient cities of political power and important commercial cities situated at the cross-roads of the various international trading routes (refer to the enclosed map) -that went westwards to West Asia and the Roman Empire; northwards, via Taxila, Pushkalavati and Purushapur to Central Asia and the Silk Route and eastwards to China- at least for more than two thousand five hundred years. This city- whose origins go back to thousands of years of ancient history, shrouded in mystery - is located at a distance of 145 km south-east of Delhi and 58 km north-west of Agra, covering an area of about 3,800 sq. km., today, and Yamuna river flows through the center of the Mathura district. Brajbhoomi can be divided into two distinct units - the eastern part in the trans-Yamuna tract with places like Gokul, Mahavan, Baldeo, Mat and Bajna and the western side of the Yamuna covering the Mathura region that encompasses Vrindavan, Govardhan, Kusum Sarovar, Barsana and Nandgaon. (Refer to the attached maps).

The city of Mathura is also the birth place of Bhagavan (God) Krishna- the Supreme Personality of Godhead, or the most complete, or the ultimate manifestation of God. His descent (avatar) and his lilas, or divine/human playful activities, as documented in the ancient traditional scriptures such as Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Padma Purana, and varaha Purana dates back to about 5000 years. According to a chronology based on the information given within the massive 100,000-verse Mahabharata Epic worked out by Dr. K.N.S. Patnaik, the above event took place at the end of Dwapar and the beginning of Kali-Yuga just around 3200 BCE. Incidentally, the time cycle as conceived by Hindu seers consists of 1000 cycles of four Yugas or distinctive ages, with Kali being the shortest of 432,000 human years; and within this scheme the present age of the universe is estimated to be around 31 trillion years-that is close to the modern cosmological calculations.

The term 'Bra-Bhoomi' does not refer to an area with clearly defined political and/or administrative boundaries. It is derived from the Sanskrit linguistic term, 'vraja', which is used in the oldest accounts of Krishna's childhood lilas or playful activities to mean 'an enclosure of herdsmen' and as 'a place where cows roam'. Therefore, the term 'Braj-Bhoomi' is recognized as the name for the region or land full of hills, forests, ponds and groves, and of course the Yamuna river where Krishna grazed his cattle and played out his lilas with his foster parents and cowherd playmates, and in which all the sacred places associated with his childhood years are located.

Vrindavan, just 15 kilometers from Mathura is another major place of great importance- a pilgrimage. The term, 'Vrindaban', as Vrinda-Van means the Van or forest of Vrinda, or Tulasi- a

plant of Basil-plant family. This name evokes the divine playfulness and most lovable lilas of Shri Krishna with gwalas (playmate boys) and gopis (playmate girls) and His consort Shri Radha. This town of about 60-70 thousand residents hold more than 5000 temples, along with some major temples of great historical and religious significance. The two small groves known as the “Nidhi-Ban” and “Seva-Kunj” are recognized to be the most sacred because it is believed that Radha-Krishna with their divine friends still play out their lilas every night within these groves. All the major and minor activities including social, religious and economic revolve around Radha-Krishna and their devotees. In fact, the residents and the pilgrims in this town belonging to various Hindu social strata and castes, including Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians imbibe Krishna tradition. One can also discover that the saints and devotees belonging to almost all kinds of religious traditions-some from other countries such as the members of International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) - hold their permanent places, often called ashrams, in Vrindaban: this place has become such a place of magnetic attraction.

Political History:

The traditional accounts of Mathura, the city, the region, and the people come from various Vedic literatures, the Ramayana and Mahabharata Epics, the Puranas, as well as from the Buddhists and Jaina sources. In one account, Satrugna, the younger brother of Lord Rama(one of the most significant avatars of Lord Vishnu), established the city of Mathura after defeating and killing the asura/rakshasa(demon) Lavana, the son of demon king Madhu-so goes the name Madhura-a variant of Mathura. This city then became a royal capital as well an important commercial center. Later on, this came under the patronage of Yadavas, and ruled by a king name Surasena, the father of Vasudeva and Kunti. The ancient texts- from third or fourth century BCE-belonging to Jaina and Buddhist traditions also describe the Surasenas, with its capital at Mathura. Shri Krishna was born in the Yadava lineage, as described in detail in Bhagavata Purana.

The historicity of Surasena and Mathura city is further attested by Greek and Latin writers quoting Megasthenes [2]:

“Arrian writes that the god Herakles was held in special honour by thr Sourasenoi, an Indian tribe who possess two large cities, Methora and Cleisobora and through country flows a navigable river called Iobars. He adds that Herakles had a single daughter called Pandaia---. Pliny writes that the river Jomanes flows through the Palibothri into the Ganges between the towns of Methora and Carisobora. Ptolemy refers to a Modoura, the city of gods, which sounds close to Madurai, but the context suggests that it might be the northern Mathura.”

Mathura remained well established and an important political and urban center , as well as commercial center through the Maurya, post-Morya, Sunga to the Kushana periods from 3rd century BCE through 4th century CE.

Invaders and Mughal Rulers of Delhi Sultanate:

Here is a brief mention of some of the aggressive foreign invaders, who though ruling from Delhi impacted greatly the land of Braj and its tradition.

Mahmud of Ghazni: He came in from the town of Ghazni near Kabul in Afganistan and raided, plundered, and looted North- central part of India in the 11th century.

Muhammad Ghuri: He invaded India, and defeated the famous Rajput king Prithvi Raj in 1192. He went back while leaving behind his most able slave Qutb-ud-Din Aibak to rule the captured part of the North-central region of India. He can be called the first Sultan of Delhi.

Babur: The first Turkis, a descendant of Genghis Khan, became ruler of Delhi Sultanate in 1525.

Humayun: The son of Babur took over the throne in 1530 after the death of his father, and later he lost to Sher Shah, another Afghan Ruler, but regained his power in 1556. Then he could rule only for six months due to his sudden death, and his son Akbar who was only about 14 years of age took over the throne.

Akbar: He just like his predecessors was a ruthless medieval war lord who had unquenchable intent on conquest of new territory. In 1583, he founded the citadel, and named it Allahabad, the city of Allah. He had also imposed a special tax known as jizya on Hindus, and under his rule Hindus were forced to convert to Islam. Later in his life, it appears, “some time about the middle of 1562 there was a remarkable change in Akbar’s outlook in life---.”[3], and he started supporting the temples of Brajbhoomi by giving grants. This relationship with the Braj was fostered through his most important minister Maharaja Man Singh son of Maharaja Bhagavandas of the Prithviraj family.

Jahangir: He reigned from Delhi after the death of his father Akbar from 1605 through 1627, and continued his financial support to temples that started by his father.

Shah Jahan: the son of Jahangir became the ruler-the Mughal Emperor- of Delhi Sultanate in 1627. He also continued patronage of temples and Braj culture to some extent.

Aurangzeb: He took over the sultanate in the year 1679 from his father Shah Jahan by killing his three brothers, and thus became most ruthless and violent Mughal Emperor. He introduced reforms to make his empire a more genuinely Muslim state. The Following three significant policies need to be mentioned:

- A tax (jizia) on non-Muslims is re-imposed in 1679.
- Patronage of Braj suspended.
- Destruction, plundering, and looting of existence temples started.
- Forced conversion to Islam restarted.

The Aurangzeb died in the town of Ahmadnagar in the year 1707.

Years following Aurangzeb's death, the Jats- a Rajput clan-worker and warrior from the surrounding small feudal state became politically very powerful. The two names-Badan Singh Jat and his son Suraj Mal Jat -are worth mentioning as they became the most prominent patrons and protectors of Braj temples and culture. The Badan Singh Jat became the first ever to be called Braj Raja, or "King of Braj".

These rulers were having also friendly relations with the ruler of Jaipur- the Rajput King Sawai Jai Singh.

Suraj Mal started work on his new palace in 1732- 30 miles south of Dig- Bharatpur.

"At the height of his glory, he got erected the fountain palaces called Bhavans which were surpassed in India for elegance and perfection of workmanship only by Taj Mahal of Agra".

Suraj Mal became very powerful financially and militarily, and sacked Delhi in the year 1753.

Ahmad Shah Abdali: An Afghan ruler invaded India, and took Delhi in the year 1757, and then moved into the boundaries the King Suraj Mal. He then kept plundering and looting up to Agra to leave nothing standing.

Afghan's soldiers entered the holy city Mathura, and indiscriminate slaughter was carried out when this was the time of spring festival of Holi, and many pilgrims had come to Braj for this popular festival. The following surviving report from a witness tells the story of the most gruesome horror and atrocities:

“It was midnight when the camp followers went out to attack. It was thus managed: one horseman mounted a horse and took ten to twenty others; each attached to the tail of the horse preceding it, and drove them just like a string of camels. When it was one watch after sunrise I saw them come back. Every horseman had loaded up all his horses with plundered property, and a top of it rode the girl-captives and the slaves. The severed heads were tied up in rugs like bundles of grains and placed on the heads of the captives.... After afternoon prayer an order was given to carry the severed heads to the entrance gates of the chief minister’s quarters, where they were entered in registers, and then built up into heaps and pillars. Each man, in accordance with the number of heads he had brought in, received, after they had been counted, five rupees a head from the state. Then the heads were stuck upon lances and were taken to the gate of the chief minister. It was an extraordinary display! Wherever your glance fell nothing else was to be perceived but severed heads stuck upon lances, and the number could not be less than stars in the heaven”.[4]

The ravaging troops continued their massacre in Vrindaban:

“Wherever you gazed you beheld heaps of the slain; you could only pick your way with difficulty, owing to the quantity of bodies lying about and the amount of blood spilt. At one place we reached, we saw about two hundred children lying in a heap. Not one of the dead bodies had a head.”[4]

The Krishna’s childhood place in Mahaban was defended by about four thousand strong ascetics, all of whom died fighting the Abdali’s brutal troops.

Building, Destruction, and Rebuilding of Magnificent Temples of Brajbhoomi: A Glimpse of Painful History

Here is a brief history of one of the large and magnificent temples of Krishna built, destroyed by invaders, and rebuilt in the city of Mathura and surrounding areas. There is a strong historical evidence to suggest that worship of Krishna has been carried out in this area in some form at least since the fourth century B.C.E. The references of some of the important historical sources will be made later in the following section.

Keshavadev Temple of Mathura:

This is one of earliest Krishna temples that were situated in Mathura at the ancient sight of Krishna’s birth place, as described by Tarikh Yamini of Al Utbi, the secretary of the invader from Afghanistan- Mahmud of Ghazni- in the year 1017.

He records that-

“He saw a building of exquisite structure, which the inhabitants declared to be the handiwork not of men but of Genii (superhuman). The town wall was constructed of solid stone, and had opening on to the river two gates, raised on high and massive basements to protect them from the floods. On the two sides of the city were thousands of houses with the idol temples attached all of masonry and strengthened with bars of iron; and opposite them were other buildings supported on stout wooden pillars. In the middle of the city was a temple, larger and finer than the rest, to which neither painting nor description could do justice.... If anyone wished to construct a building equal to it, he would not be able to do so without spending a hundred million dinars, and work would occupy two hundred years, even though the most able and experienced workman were employed.”[5]

This grand temple was plundered looted, and destroyed by Ghazni, and later on it was rebuilt in 1150. This temple was again destroyed in the early sixteenth century, during the reign of Sikandar Lodi-another Afghan ruler. The Mughal records say of Sikandar Lodi:

“He was so zealous a Musalman that he utterly destroyed many places of worship of the infidels, and left not a single vestige remaining of them. He entirely ruined the shrines of Mathura, that mine of heathenism, and turned their principal temples into saraes and colleges. Their stone images were given to the butchers to serve them as meat-weights, and all the Hindus of Mathura were strictly prohibited from shaving their heads and beards and performing their ablutions. He thus put an end to all the idolatrous rites of the infidels there; and no Hindu, if he wished to his head or beard shaved, could get a barber to do it.”[6]

This temple was again built in early seventeenth century by a Hindu King Bir Singh of Orchha, as the French traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier while traveling in Mathura in 1650 called the Keshavadev temple as, “one of the most sumptuous edifices in all of India....and the temple is of such a vast size that, though in hollow, one can see it five or six kos (12 miles) off, the building being very lofty and very magnificent.”[7]

This structure too was destroyed in 1669 by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and ordered the images to be taken to Agra to be buried under the steps of a mosque “so that people might trample upon them forever”. However, the temple priests found a way to secure the deity, and secretly moved away to Kamban in Bharatpur, Rajasthan before the deity was to be taken away by Aurangzeb’s men. The Govindadev deity resides currently in the palace garden of King Jai Singh II of Jaipur, Rajasthan.

The mosque that was built in place of the Krishna temple remains in place today and is a source of growing tension between Muslims and Hindus in this part of India. Frederick S. Growse, the Chief British Administrator of Mathura around the year 1882, after the Mathura came under British rule in 1803, took interest in renewing the ancient Keshavadev temple and other

plundered monuments around. It took another 150 years to start constructing a new temple and pilgrimage center at this site in 1953. The present magnificent, massive structural complex made of white marble at the site of Krishna's birth place, and beside the mosque built by Aurangzeb, is known as the Janmabhumi. The temple houses the presiding deities of Radha and Krishna.

Sanskritic/Dharmic (Religious?) History

Krishna: The Beautiful History/Legend of Bhagavan-The Absolute and Supreme Personality of Godhead

History of Krishna is long and complex dating back to about 3200 BCE. According to traditional sources such as Vishnu Purana, Harivamsa, Bhagavata Purana, Chandhyogya Upanishad and Mahabharata, the supreme Bhagavan (God) descends or incarnates periodically into this world in various forms in order to protect dharma and maintain the cosmic order. These manifestations occur with different potencies-from minimum to maximum to complete-for the purpose of directly intervening into certain aspect of disharmony created into the manifested universe. So within this theological doctrine, Krishna descended on the earth as the complete and absolute personality of Godhead, and played out his childhood activities till up to about eleven years of age within the twelve forests of Brajbhoomi, before moving to Mathura where a wicked king name Kansa was a ruler. The legend of Krishna has also been narrated in ancient Jain scriptures such as Uttardhyayana Sutra, Buddhists scriptures such as ghata Jataka, and sources like Ashtadhyayi of great Sanskrit linguist Panini, and poetry and writings of a galaxy of sages, saints, poets, and devotees.

Numerous indisputable references to Krishna as a divine being are found in a number of texts in the fifth and fourth century, including early Greek sources [8]. According to these sources, such as the works of Arrian, Diodorus, and Strabo, who followed the much earlier work, *Indika*, of Megasthenes, an ambassador of the Seleucid Empire, Megasthenes described an Indian tribe called the Soursenoi, who worshipped Herakles in their land, which had a navigable river, the Jobares, and two great cities, Methora and Kleisobora.

“It is well known that the Greeks and other ancients correlated foreign gods with their own divinities, and there seems little reasonable doubt (and almost all scholars agree) that the Sourasenoi refers to the Surasenas, a branch of the Yadu dynasty to which Krishna belonged; Herakles refers to Krishna, or Hari-Krishna; Methora to Mathura, Krishna's birthplace;

Kleisobora to Krishna pura, ‘city of Krishna’; and the Jobares to Yamuna river, where Krishna sported. Quintus Curtius also mentions that when Alexander the Great confronted the Indian King Porus, the latter’s soldiers were carrying an image of Herakles at their head [9].

Krishna was born (appeared) to his parents, father Vasudeva and mother Devaki who were put in jail in Mathura by the tyrant King Kansa. At his birth, Krishna was secretly taken to the village Gokul to be fostered and nurtured by his foster parents Nanda Maharaj and Yasoda Rani, and there he performed his “Rasa Lilas”- the divine/human playful activities with His parents, and His playmates cowherd boys (gwalas) and girls (gopis), full of love, full of delight, and full of meanings for all kinds of beings. It was the eighth day of the second half of rainy month of the Bhadrapada (August-September) when the “Shining One” came down in this world for the protection of the virtuous, for the extirpation of the evil doors, for establishment of dharma-the world order, and for giving the unlimited pleasure and joy to his devotees. Thus this Brajbhoomi, with all its forests, hills, ponds, and groves became his playground, and this is what we have been participating through reenactment of his pastime activities by performing Ban Yatra. Krishna and His consort Radha, along with his pastime friends and devotees (gopis and gwalas) are always here-so we believe. The Krishna’s personality, and his activities for about one hundred twenty five years carried out in the Braj, Mathura, and finally in Dwarka-Dham before leaving this planet to go back to his own original Dham (divine home) called Goloka-Dham, inspired a galaxy of saints, sages, philosophers, poets, writers, artists, dramatists, singers, dancers, sculptors, temple architects, and their creativity in their own fields exploded across the centuries throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Consequently, this all created an unbounded depth and breadth of multidimensional knowledge field for human mind and heart to explore and to be able to delve into realms of the very core of our existential conditions, and beyond

Vajranabh, the great grandson of Krishna inherited the kingdom of Braj after the disastrous events of Mahabharata war around 3100 B.C.E., and leaving of Krishna going back to his own divine home Goloka-Dham. After the death of Vajranabh, the neglect and deterioration of this land together with temples, ponds, groves, forests, banks of Yamuna River, and places of Krishna’s activities continued for a very long time. These entities fell under further neglect and deterioration as the Jains and Buddhist came in power, and built their own temples and places of worship. Further destruction continued during the foreign invasions by Turkish and Mughal invaders.

Rediscovery, Reconstruction, and Reawakening of Braj:

Rediscovery, reconstruction, and reawakening of the Braj (lila-dham) can be attributed to many great Vaishnava saints and Krishna devotees, but among them Narayan Bhatt, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Vallabhacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Hitharivansaji, and Swamy Hari Das are

recognized to be the earliest founders-at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Narayan Bhatt, the first to work out a detailed itinerary of the Ban Yatra was born to a learned brahman named Raghunath Bhatt in the southern Indian town of Madurai in the year 1531. After completing his formal education at an early age of about twelve years, he began to develop a keen interest in Braj. As the legend goes: one day Narayan Bhatt sat down on the bank of Godavari River-some distance north of his birth place-just after taking bath and meditated on Krishna. Suddenly he had a glorious vision of Radha Krishna; and Krishna commanded him to go to Braj-about 800 miles north from his place- and begin his work of revealing the lila sites. His primary mission was to uncover and make manifest in physical, concrete form that which was hidden and existing only in an unmanifest form. Narayan Bhatt's biographer narrates the details about his continuously expanding real visions, and his efforts to reestablish all the lost temple sites, lila sites once established by Vajranabh-Krishna's great-grandson. Among all the sites revealed the following are worth mentioning:

Radhakund pond-complex; important ponds around Mount Govardhan: Manasi ganga, Kusum Sarovar, Govindakund, and Chandra Sarovar; location of birth place of Krishna; the place and prison of wicked King Kansa; Shiva shrine of Bhuteshwar; Gokul; the fostered place of Krishna; Radha's town of Barsana, along with all the surrounding sites such as villages where Radha's closest girlfriends (divine gopis) were born.

In fact, he is the one who laid out the entire path of Ban Yatra, and determined its circumference to be about 168 miles that is being accepted yet today. He also mapped out the location of all its major twelve forests, all the major mountains in Braj; major ponds, pleasure groves and lila sites.

Narayan Bhatt established the village of Unchagaon, where his descendant still live today. He was great thinker and writer who composites several books that deal with all almost aspects of Braj. His final words echo his vision, and highest degree of devotion and dedication to Brajbhoomi.

“Devotion to Braj should be performed. The land of Braj is the worthy of worship. This very Braj is the highest place. Braj is the body of Shri Krishna. Krishna, the son of Nanda, never leaves Braj.”[10]

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu-divine love incarnation of Radha-Krishna as recognized by Gaudiya Vaisnava- visited Braj sometime in the year 1512, according to historical writings of Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition originated in Bengal-the birth place (district) of Mahaprabhu. He first travelled to the forests closest to Mathura before heading toward Mountain Govardhan, and there visiting various ponds and groves such as the most auspicious Radhakund, he fell in the state of ecstatic love toward Radha-Krishna. He journeyed widely in Braj, and as a model devotee, he revealed the way to enter into and how to participate in the past time yet being played out the

lilas of Radha and Krishna. He restored the lost memories of unmanifest lilas, mapped out the parikrama path, and showed the path how to experience directly the concrete form of Brajbhoomi with all of our senses.

The great saint Vallabhacharya-the founder of Pushti Marg (the path of Krishna’s divine grace)-born in 1479 in southern part of India while making a pilgrimage to northern parts at an early age just after finishing his education in all the major Hindu scriptures saw Krishna in a dream. This was the year 1493, while pilgrimage through Braj Krishna revealed him on the top of Mount Govardhan, and a divine form emerged what is recognized to be the “Govardhan Nath”, and since then this particular form of Krishna has been the principal deity of the followers and devotees of this tradition. This iconic form is an integral composite of two lilas that Krishna had performed in his childhood in the Braj: Krishna Himself as the living and breathing Mount Govardhan, and holding the Govardhan as an umbrella on little finger of his left hand. Vallabhacharya initiated his own Ban Yatra, along with the circumambulation of Mount Govardhan, with the identification of the “Mukharvind” (lotus mouth) of the mountain at the village of Jatipura.

Note: All Ban-Yatras are circular journeys through the twelve principal forests, even though the actual itinerary corresponding to various traditions and sect-lineages may vary; and the retelling and reenactment of lila-stories, along with devotional singing, and glorification go on throughout the course of pilgrimage, just for giving the opportunity to pilgrims to be able to experience directly with their all the senses, that they are actually, actively participating in the Radha-krishna lilas. The current physical conditions of the majority of forests, ponds, groves, etc. are in ruins and very deplorable. Once (about 60-70 years ago) the very beautiful, with mighty flow and clean water the Yamuna River has now become very polluted; and various agencies-governmental and non-governmental- as well as saints living in Braj are working toward cleaning and restoration.

Braj Sanskriti:

The sanskritic (sanskriti vs. culture: please see the note below) traditions of Brajbhoomi are founded on the past time activities (around 3100 B.C.E.) of Radha and Krishna, and their cowherd playmates. In brief, these include:

- Singing the stories
- Seeing the deities of Radha and Krishna in temples
- Krishna’s daily calendar of activities within the temples
- Ban-Yatra through the twelve forests of Vrindaban, and circumambulation (parikramas) around Vrindaban, and around the Mount Govardhan
- Ras Lila: Radha-Krishna theatre

- Festivals

Among these, I will discuss first the Hindu pilgrimage, in general, and compare and contrast with Ban-Yatra by bringing out some of their hidden philosophical features. Then I take up a brief overview of some of the important temples, as well as festivals that are very popular in Braj today.

Hindu Pilgrimage (Tirtha Yatra)

Hindu pilgrimage known as Tirtha Yatra can be broadly classified into two primary categories, and these are:

- (1) Sakama Pilgrimage (with worldly purpose)
- (2) Nishkama Pilgrimage (without worldly purpose)

Then there is another kind of pilgrimage, known as Ban Yatra- very unique and loaded with philosophical meanings. We will discuss in brief some of their most significant features, including meanings and purposes.

Sakama Pilgrimage:

This journey is usually performed to gain specific “fruits”. These fruits stem from the fields of worldly riches and desires, and also from the field of sanatana dharma. These primary fields (artha, kama, and dharma) of human activities and goals of life are grouped under the primary field of human activities, known as “Purushartha”. The pilgrims go to sacred, powerful places usually with the strong sense of achieving something favorable to their personal and family life, and/or to look for a positive self-transformative or enlightening experience. The motivation, preparation and execution of this type of pilgrimage can be understood as the particular form of “asceticism”, in which the pilgrims are willing to go through all kinds of physical, emotional and cognitive hardships that are normally encountered during this journey. In order to achieve maximum benefits one must be willing to embrace asceticism while taking the journey. The pilgrimage in the Hindu tradition is certainly not the site-seeing vacation.

Nishkama Pilgrimage:

In this type of pilgrimage, the pilgrims are not looking for fulfillment of their own worldly desires and achievements, but perform the journey with a strong commitment of embracing asceticism to finally achieve the ultimate goal of life known as “Moksha”, or liberation - the last entity of the Purushartha-from the painful entanglement of the cycles of birth, growth, and death in this mortal world.

Notes:

- These types of tirtha yatras (sakama and nishkama) are quite common in India, and are performed by the followers of Hindu-, Jain-, Sikh-, as well as Buddhist-traditions. One of the most famous pilgrimages done by Hindus is to go to “Kashi” or “Varanasi”-the abode of Lord Shiva- the most illustrious and supreme of all the ascetics, and to take his “darshan”. Also, there is the “Mother Ganga”-the divine sacred river, where the pilgrims perform worship, take dips into, just to cross over the worldly existence to achieve moksha.
- Most of these tirtha yatras are predominantly linear in motion, as the pilgrim’s start there journey from a location (home, village, or town) to reach their final destinations, take darshan, perform pooja, and then return back to their starting place. This linear motion has a significant bearing upon the “Ban Yatra”, that is circular in motion, and that is performed in the “Home of Bhagavan Krishna, or Brajbhoomi”.

Ban Yatra in Brajbhoomi:

This is also called “parikrama”, or circumambulation around the Brajbhoomi. There are primary twelve forests, and another set of twelve secondary but smaller forests within the traditional geographical space of this region. The primary forests are:

Mahaban, Talban, Kumudban, Bahulban, Kamban, Kokilban, Vrindaban, Bhadraban, Bhandiraban, Belban, lohban, and Mahaban. These twelve forests are imagined, materialized, and arranged as twelve-petals-lotus-flower that is encircled by the pilgrim’s journey known as Ban-Yatra. (See the attached figure)

There are primarily three kinds of parikrmas (circular motions) in Brajbhoomi.

Vrindaban Parikrma: This is about eight miles long, and performed around the perimeter of Vrindaban in clockwise circular motion. Lots of devotees living in perform this on the daily basis, while doing darshan of Radha-Krishna deity in various temples along the way.

Govardhan Parikrma: This circumambulation, of course clockwise, around the most sacred hill, the Govardhan, is around twenty six miles long, and this journey is also performed on the daily basis by many devotees living in Brajbhoomi. Also, many of the devotees coming to visit this region from neighboring villages, towns and big cities like Delhi also perform this parikrma. There are many beautiful ponds, groves, sacred places where many saints and sages belonging to various branches of Dharma-tree performed their tapasya (penance), and also place where Krishna played out his lilas. This parikrma is so popular that one can find pilgrims in this journey, day and night throughout the year.

Ban Yatra- Pilgrimage Through the Twelve Forests:

The path of pilgrimage through the twelve forests-the Ban Yatra- is circular in the physical space. The pilgrims reaching Brajbhoomi intending to do the ban yatra choose a starting place or a temple-different sects choose different starting place-(for example: for Gaudia, Radhavallabhi, and Nimbarki Vaisnavas, the journey starts in Vrindaban-the very heart of the intimate realm of lilas of Krishna-at a temple which houses lingam, or phallus of Lord Shiva.) and then go on to complete circumambulation of Brajbhoomi by keep moving clockwise. Essentially, in this journey there are no fixed points to start with, and after the completion of the journey the end points meet with the respective starting points. Unlike linear yatras, there is no fixed center that one moves to achieve the final goal-like in tirtha yatras discussed above-because the center is every where within this physical space of Brajbhoomi, because Radha and Krishna is ever present at every point/place. Here the pilgrims come to directly participate into the past time lilas (leelaas- the divine playful activities) that were first time played out by Krishna with his consort Radha, and other gopis and gwalas more than five thousand years ago. And these lilas are still going on, as witnessed also by David Haberman during his own journey [11]. The real and ultimate goal of this ban yatra is not the attainment of “Moksha”-as in nishkama tirtha yatra-, but the direct experience of “eternal bliss”, or “eternal divine love”, or “the pure bhakti rasa”, while being in the company of divine couple Radha-Krishna and there intimate gopis and gwalas. This divine experience is above and beyond the state of moksha, and the pure devotee pilgrims in Brij will not accept ‘Moksha’ if offered, but will long for the “Rasa-Bhava”(eternal, unlimited ocean of devotional love) of Radha-Krishna lilas. Based on the Braj tradition, David Haberman beautifully summarises the essence of Braj and its glorious place in the annals of Hindu world-view.

“The very land of Braj is considered to be divine by the inhabitants of Braj. One of the major sixteenth-century developers of Braj, Narayan Bhatt, writes in his *Vraja Bhakti Vilasa* that “Braj is the very form of Krishna.” A Braj version of the creation of that form explains that the single point, dividing itself, became the blue Krishna and the golden Radha, and the intermingling love play of the two produced the green land of Braj. The center point spreads ever outward, losing itself in the expanding (and pointless) circle of Braj *through* the play of Radha and Krishna and *for* the play of Radha and Krishna. Thus the world itself is divine. With Vaishnava bhakti we have entered a realm where matter matters, and the senses make sense.”

Meditation on Some Key Linguistic, Conceptual, Philosophical and Technical Terms:

Culture vs Sanskriti:

Let me first introduce the pertinent meanings behind the term “culture” before examining the term “sanskriti”. According to American Heritage Dictionary, the term, “culture” within the

social context means: “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns of a people: a style of social and artistic expression peculiar to a society or class; intellectual and artistic activity”.

The term “sanskriti” incorporates not all the behavior patterns; not all the social and artistic expressions; and not all the intellectual and artistic activities, but only those patterns, only those expressions, only those activities that enrich and enhance the human health, prosperity, happiness, peace, bliss, or in a nutshell total well-being at all levels -individual, family, social, national, international, and cosmic. The activities are conducted, in a broader sense, by an individual through the agency of mind, intelligence, speech, and actual actions, and include all domains of human engagements. They cannot be arbitrary but in accordance with the directives of the appropriate dharmic fields. The field of sanskriti is usually recognized to represent the interior personality through the exterior patterns of behavior, and the artistic and intellectual expressions, and these exterior activities then in turn create the effective fields toward enriching interior personality as well. In fact, if properly seen, this is an evolutionary spiraling process of growth, of purification of inner-self, of tuning the inner-self to blissful realm of Brahman or God. And therefore, this active experience can rightly be called: Sanskriti-Yoga. This yoga is not a simple physical, intellectual, or emotional connectivity but an organic, integrative and transformative activity toward achieving an enlightened coherence between the interior and exterior personality, between an individual and society, between society and a nation, and so on.

Lila (Leelaa) of Bhagavan Krishna: Meditation on Its Essence, Multidimensionality- Hidden and Manifested

The linguistic and technical term, “Lila” or “Leelaa” can be and must be recognized to be one of the very embryonic terms concealing inherently the mystery of the basic essence of the universe- hidden as well as manifested- and its original source. Bringing forth the universe, along with all its material and living variety, complexity, interconnectivity, its inherent cyclic processes of birth, sustenance, dissolution at all levels-quantum through galactic- is the lila of Supreme Personality of Godhead (Purushottama). Lila is in one sense a divine (divya) playful activity of Bhagavan Krishna but he remains always totally detached and non-entangled, while we human beings under most conditions get attached and entangled with karma and its fruits, and consequently get inflicted with Karmic bondage. The most basic and ultimate or final question is: what is the purpose behind this universe or the very existence? The final answer is: Krishna declares: this is only my own lila; I wanted to arrange a divine play for myself by myself, so I became many and all just to play with this multiplicity of myself, yet I remain transcendental (beyond and above space and time, and Prakriti-the ground of my creation) to my own creation and lila. It is very pertinent here to quote his message that he sends to the gopis of Braj through his best devotee, friend and councilor Uddhava.

“From myself I create, sustain and dissolve myself in myself by means of myself in the form of *gunas* (the materials modes of Nature), the senses and the primary elements of nature (Prakriti), through the power of my own *maayaa*.” (Shrimad Bhagavata Purana Book X.47.30)

The above statement- though appears to be containing several wonderful paradoxes- is the very foundation of Vedic-World-View. All other paradoxes within the basic processes of the very existence and continuously changing human experiences, including those of modern sciences especially in the quantum domain stem from the very grounds of the field of “Prakriti”-the foundational matrix of the universe-hidden and manifested. Thus, one can derive the following characteristics of the divine play- lila:

- Avataraan or descent (incarnation) of Krishna in the Braj is his lila. His body is “divyam” (divine), the *avyaya atman*, though it appears to be human, made of material modes of Prakriti.
- His all the playful activities in the Braj for about twelve years of human age are his divine lilas, exhibiting human as well as divine dimensions. He can manifest simultaneously with many higher order dimensions, including some beyond time and space.
- Some of his lilas may appear to be unethical or adharmic- for example, Maharaas Lila- to our senses and cognitive apparatus, but they are essentially beyond and above the dimensions of field of human ethics. He was performing this divine Rasa-dance (Raasa-Leela) with himself by himself by manifesting simultaneously in so many identical divine forms to accompany each of the hundreds of gopis in this dance, and this act was-as the Bhagavata Purana declares most emphatically-the most wonderful act of a God-child who was playing with his own numerous shadows.It should be interesting to note that Krishna was only about eleven years of human age: he is always of this age, beyond age and time. It may be most critical here to recall Krishna’s words from Bhagavadgita: all living entities (including all the gopis) are part and parcel of me. So, who are the others that he was dancing with? **No one**. In this very lila, he also demonstrates that he remains not only totally detached but also wins over the most powerful force -the god of Desire, the Kamadeva, who later incarnates as one of his sons born to one of his queens, Rukmini Devi. Furthermore, paradoxically the birth of the “Desire” itself is the very seed (refer to Rigveda) within Bhagavan to bring forth the universe into existence, but this divine-desire is basically different from all other fields of desires in the sense that the later can potential trap us as well as other divine beings into world of karmic fields. Only Radha-Krishna and his own blessed devotees remain eternally and totally detached to the fruits and traps of desires and karmas. And this state is the ultimate state of existence where the ineffable streams of Nirguna Bhakti-Rasa flow with no bounds, from eternity to eternity.

- The final concluding remarks (Bhagavata Mahapurana 10:33:40) on the Maharaasa Leela sums up with bold declaration its very deepest essence; and are the benedictory for all of the human beings to follow:

“The sober and the enlightened (dhira) person who is endowed with a strong sense of commitment and faith (shraddha) should hear and describe these pastimes of Vishnu (Krishna) with the maidens of Braj. One achieves the supreme devotion (para-bhakti, the very essence of Godhead) to the Bhagavan (God), and quickly frees oneself from kama-driven lust (the very seed of all the desires creating bondage and suffering), the most serious disease of the heart.”

- All the activities of Krishna on this planet, including in Mathura and Dwaraka Dhams for about one hundred and twenty five human years are his own lilas, and they must be comprehended and relished as such in order for us to be able to fully, joyfully participate in. The ultimate and final purpose of human life is to enter into the Goloka Dham of Radha-Krishna where such eternally blissful and divine-rasa-filled lilas are routinely played out. And they are also played out regularly in Braj Dham, though remain hidden from most of our mortal eyes.
- Imitation and emulation of Radha-Krishna lilas cannot and must not be done by any living being-human and/or divine even if one has achieved highest degree of yogic powers. Even a pretended imitation will lead to disgraceful fall into abyss of unending darkness inhabited by the lower forms of life. All we can and must follow what Krishna taught us as the Jagat-Guru through his eternal songs in Bagavadgita and Shrimad Bhagavatam.

Some Prominent Temples in Mathura-Vrindaban

Keshavadev Temple or Janmabhoomi Temple at Mathura

The mosque that was built in place of the Krishna temple remains in place today and is a source of growing tension between Muslims and Hindus in this part of India. Frederick S. Growse, the Chief British Administrator of Mathura around the year 1882, after the Mathura came under British rule in 1803, took interest in renewing the ancient Keshavadev temple and other plundered monuments around. It took another 150 years to start constructing a new temple and pilgrimage center at this site in 1953. The present magnificent, massive structural complex made of white marble at the site of Krishna’s birth place- beside the mosque built by Aurangzeb- is known as the Janmabhumi. The temple houses the presiding deities Radha and Krishna.

Banke-Bihari Temple

This was built in 1864, and it is one of Vrindavana's most famous temples all over India. The Deity of Banke-Bihari was discovered hidden within the grounds of a grove-forest, which is now known as Nidhibana, by Swami Haridasa. Swami Haridasa is recognized as one of the greatest saints to whom Krishna manifested as Banke-Behari and he was the music-guru of the famous musician Tansen in the Mughal court of Emperor Akbar.

Dwarkadhish Temple

This was built in 1814 in the center of the town; it is the most visited temple in Mathura. This temple is managed by followers of another great saint Vallabhacharya, and is housing the Deity Krishna as “Lord of Dwarka”. It is located in the eastern part of Mathura, not far from the Yamuna River, with its beautiful architecture: the temple carving and paintings are major attractions. The temple also serves as a center during the festive days of Holi, Janmashtami and Diwali festival (festival of lights)

Madana-Mohana Temple

This famous temple was established in 16th century by Srila Sanatana Gosvami, one of the six goswami disciples of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and it was the first temple to be built in Vrindaban, which at that time was just a forest. The original Deity of Krishna as Madana-Mohana was taken to Karauli in Rajasthan for safety during the attack on Vrindaban by the soldiers of the fanatical Muslim Emperor, Aurangzeb. The remains of this pink sandstone temple can still be seen in Vrindaban.

Krishna Balrama Mandir

Built by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), it is one of the most beautiful modern temples in Vrindaban. The principal deities of this temple are Krishna, his brother Balram and Radha (Krishna's consort). Within the compound of this temple is the samadhi of Shri Prabhupada, the founder of the ISKCON, built in pure white marble. Hare Krishna devotees from all around the world flock here, bringing a truly international flavor to this ancient holy city.

Seva Kunja

The Seva Kunj is one of the two most sacred groves in Vrindabana where Lord Krishna once performed- and it is believed that it is still being played out every night- the Raaslila (divine playful activities) with Radha-Rani. After the lilas Krishna sets down to braid and decorate Radha's hair with flowers, and massages her lotus feet. They would also call upon gopis to spend the night here, dancing and enjoying transcendental pastimes. There is also a small temple dedicated to Radha and Krishna's pastime lilas, called Rang Mahal.

Radha Vallabha Temple

This is another very important and popular temple of Vrindaban which was founded by another great saint Harivamsa Gosvami, who started the Radha Vallabha sect emphasizing devotion to Radharani. In this temple, there is no deity of Radharani, but a crown has been placed next to Krishna to signify her presence. The original temple was destroyed by the Muslim rulers in 1670, and a new temple was later built by the side of the old one.

Jaipur Temple

One of Vrindaban's most opulent temples known as "Jaipur Temple" was built by the Maharaja of Jaipur, Sawai Madhav Singh in 1917. The fine hand-carved sandstone is of unparalleled workmanship; the huge pillars that hold up the roof are each carved from single solid rock, and the intricately fashioned marble on the altar is reminiscent of the architectural style of Mughal period. The Maharaja financed the railway line that connects Vrindabana with Mathura, just for the purpose of hauling the huge pieces of sandstone used in the temple construction. The deities worshipped here are Sri Radha-Madhava, Ananda-bihari and Hansa-gopala.

Radha Damodara Temple

This is one of the most important ancient (late 16th century) temples in Vrindaban. The original deity, hand carved by Rupa Gosvami-a disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu- had given, as a gift, to his beloved disciple, Jiva Gosvami, who later built a temple here. Today this temple, houses a large number of samadhis of saints and devotees.

Rangji Temple

This South- Indian- architectural style temple was built by a wealthy business family of Mathura in the year 1851, and is dedicated to Lord Ranganatha or Rangaji, a form of Lord Vishnu lying down on the Sesa Naga (celestial serpent). This temple has a traditional South Indian gateway and is surrounded by high walls. It is one of Vrindavan's largest temples. Once a year, a grand car festival (Ratha Yatra) is held, known as Brahmotsava, during the month of March-April, a festival lasting for ten days.

Jugal Kisore Temple

This is one of the oldest temples of Vrindavana, and was completed in 1627. This is one of four temples that Mughal Emperor Akbar gave permission and financial help to build for Krishna, when he visited Vrindavan in the year 1570. The remaining three temples to be built by the Gaudiya Vaisnavas were Madana-Mohana, Govindaji, and Gopinatha. Jugal Kishore temple is also known as the Kesi ghata temple, as it is located next to this ghat at the bank of Yamuna River.

Radharamana Temple

Radharamana means "one who gives divine pleasure to Radha-His consort, His own manifestation", and is one of the many names of Lord Krishna. This was the year 1542 when Radharamana's self-manifestation took place out of shaligram (a rounded sacred stone as deity of Krishna). Lord Krishna as Radharamana is the smallest deity of his most sincere first devotee Gopala Bhatta Goswami in the whole of the Vrindavan. The wooden sitting place (hoki) and shawl (chaddar) of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu that he gave as a gift to Gopala Bhatta Goswami are also kept in this temple.

Shahji Temple

This temple in Vrindavan, was designed and built in 1876 financed by a wealthy jeweller, Shah Kundan Lal of Lucknow. The deities at the temple are popularly known as the Chhote Radha Raman (Younger Radharaman). Noted for its magnificent architecture and beautiful marble sculpture, the temple has twelve spiral columns each 15 feet high. The 'Basanti Kamara' – the royal hall- is famed for its Belgian glass chandeliers and fine paintings.

Gopishvar Mahadev Temple

This Lord Shiva temple in Vrindavan is unique among all the Shiva temples in India. Here Lord Shiva is worshiped in a lingam form during day time, but during every night this lingam (phallus) is dressed as a woman, adorned with beautiful woman's dress, as well as with a nose ring. This very strange method of worship of Shiva goes against all the Vedic norms, but why? There is a beautiful legend behind it told and retold by the devotees of Vrindavan. As the story goes: One night-a very, very long night, when Krishna about nine-ten years of age played his flute to call all the gopis for Maha Rasalila dance in Vrindavan, the divine melody of flute was also heard by Lord Shiva, who was absorbed in the deep meditation for, far away on the Mount Kailash, Himalaya. Shiva rushes toward that divine sound so that he could participate in the forthcoming divine love dance of Krishna with gopis, but he soon he reached in Braj; he was stopped by the goddess Vrinda, the presiding goddess of Braj. And when he attempts to cross over the Yamuna River in Vrindavan, Vrinda told him that you being a most exalted male-ascetic

are not allowed to enter into the dance, as among all the divine female devotees, there can be only one male- that is Krishna- in this unique dance (Maha Rasalila). So if you wish, you can enter in the dance arena if and only if, you are ready to become a gopi-a female devotee of Krishna. Shiva agreed, and was adorned as a gopi by the goddess Yamuna whose physical form is a river. Thus, Shiva transformed as a female gopi, who himself is an expert of dance, but of a very, very different kind of a dance-a dance to tune in the dissolution of the universe-relished the dance of divine love, or to be more authentic, the dance invoking the ultimate Bhakti-Rasa of Krishna with the divine gopis. Since then, the Lord Shiva is being dressed up as a gopi, every night, so that he can continuously keep participating in the Maharasa dance with Radha-Krishna and their friends. Krishna gave him a new name, Gopishvar-the lord of gopis.

New Temples

There are a lot of new temples and ashrams, and among them the Gita Mandir which houses the Gita Stambh, a pillar with the entire Bhagavad Gita carved on its surface, a Birla temple built by industrialist Birlas, and a seven storied, white marble Pagal Baba Mandir are worth mentioning.

Festivals:

The following major festivals are annually celebrated in the Brajbhoomi. Given below is a very brief introduction.

Janmashtami:

The day of Krishna's descend (incarnation) is celebrated on the midnight of the eight day of the dark half of the month of Bhadrapad (August-September) that falls during the middle of monsoon season. All the beautifully decorated temples become jam-packed with enthusiastic people waiting to have the first darshan (seeing) of newly born baby, adorned with beautiful cloths. A bathing ceremony is performed by priests, while Vedic mantra and other devotional songs are being sung, and a big feast is also served in many temples and places. After the bathing ceremony, the deity of Krishna is dressed in the beautiful dress and ornaments, and gets seated upon a special throne. This celebration is then followed by everyday special activities to serve and actively participate in his continuously unfolding and ever new sweet activities for several days to come.

Radhashtami:

Radha manifests (incarnation of Krishna himself as Radha) on the bright half of the month of Bhadrapad (August-September), just after two weeks of Janmashtami. Thus, Radha and Krishna make together the ultimate divine couple, which appears to fill the whole world with the highest experience of the eternal aesthetic divine love-rasa bhava.

Radha is the crown of the Braj:

*“The decoration of the whole of Braj
has shown that a girl, essence of all the Vedas,
has descended from the womb of Kirti.
How can one describe her beauty, head to toe?
Innumerable gods of love surrender to it.
The incarnation of Radha
Is for the delight of Paramanand’s Lord.”*

Sanjhi:

Every day for five or fifteen days the temple priests and other devotees create a new lila of Radha-Krishna by making a variety of very intricate artistic patterns using colored powders, to be worshiped in the evening. These most beautiful artistic patterns are made on the flat surfaces, which include temple floors, and these patterns are called ‘Sanjhi’. The unmarried girls in the villages make the sanjhis on the selected walls of their homes by using the cow dung, potsherds, small stones and tinsel, and then they worship them as goddess for obtaining better husbands.

Deepawali:

This very big and popular festival, also known as the festival of lights, is celebrated with great pomp-and show. The focus remains on the worship of goddess Lakshmi-the goddess of wealth and prosperity-, and on the Lord Ganesh-the remover of all obstacles- from our worldly existence in order to achieve material as well as spiritual success. This is also a beginning of the New Year, especially for the business community, who normally start their financial dealings on new account-books on this very day. Today, the dark night, glows the brilliant lamp in rows. All the temples, homes, ponds, and places of worships are glittering with the rows of lighted lamps, removing the darkness from outside, as well as, from inside our hearts and minds-the darkness of ignorance and vices. Radha-Krishna together with their cowherd friends are out there playing, laughing and clapping aloud, just to give divine pleasure to their devotees.

Govardhan Puja:

Krishna, when he was only a beautiful boy of seven years of age, persuaded his foster parents, and all the other elders in his Village of Gokul to stop worshipping god Indra-the King of heaven, and worship Mount Govardhan instead because it is the Govardhan who gives us all that we need for our livelihood, including grass pastures for our cows. They all agreed and went over to worship and to make offering of all the prepared wide variety of foods to the Mount as their new god, the protector, and the provider. As goes the lila- that Krishna himself took the form of the giant Mountain Govardhan, and accepted all the offerings and gave his blessing, but no one could even get the slightest idea that it was Krishna himself, who appeared before them as the God Govardhan in disguise. Indra became very furious, and decided to teach a memorable lesson

to the people of Braj, so he started ferocious storms with violent lightening and torrential rains to destroy all the Braj, its people, its cows, its sources of livelihood, and he continued this punishment with all his might for full seven days and night. But Krishna lifted the Mount Govardhan like an umbrella and protected all the people and their kettles under it by holding firmly the Mount continuously for seven days-days and night- on the tip of smallest finger of his left hand. Thus, when Indra came out after seven days to assess the destruction of Braj, he found that he failed to punish the Braj because it was under the protection of Krishna himself-the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and the source of Indra and his powers. He later prostrated on the feet of Krishna, and asked for his forgiveness. Thus, this divine activity of Krishna came to be known as the 'lila- of- Supreme- Grace', the Govardhan Lila, and being celebrated with great devotion. There are lots of theological dimensions to this episode, but mentioning only one will be worthwhile for the purpose: Mount Govardhan is recognized as Krishna himself, and the outer material aspects, with all its stones, clays, soils, forests, groves, grasses, ponds, etc. are Krishna's prakritic (material) body-I am Purushottam (ultimate personality of Godhead), and all the universe (hidden as well as manifested) living or non-living is only a part and parcel of Me; yet I remain transcendental to all that can exist.(Bhagavadgita).

This event is celebrated in a grand manner every year in various forms: making parikrama of Govardhan, making images of Govardhan, worshiping and making food offering, and distributing this sanctified food as 'Prasad' to all, reenactment of this lila through singing and theatrical performances.

Gopashtami:

A week later after Govardhan puja, the cows are bathed, and beautifully decorated with colorful dresses and marks and then taken out in procession, with small boys dressed as Krishna and his elder brother Balaram following them. This is the reenactment of celebration of Krishna's first taking out the cows for grazing long, long time ago. This is the very day that in each home and cowshed the cows are worshiped and well fed with special treats.

Holi: The Feast of Harmony and Love

In the age of prevailing conflicts, confusions, emptiness, and meaninglessness, many leaders of all kinds and creeds-intellectuals, social scientists, physical scientists, theologians, and politicians have suddenly started preaching about the urgent need of harmony and love within this variegated world. The irony is that these words and concepts remain evasive and elusive to most of us. In the absence of real active participation (with mind, speech, and action) in the feast of harmony and love, the entire endeavor of leaders appears to be nothing more than a sonorous verbiage-an utter nominalism. Do we have an opportunity for such a feast? Yes we do! And that is what the Holi is all about.

The historical origin of Holi is still shrouded in mystery; however, many good indications place it in very remote times, all the way back when Bhagavan Krishna spent his miraculous and playful boyhood in Vrindavan, Braj-Bhoomi, India (about 5000 years ago). Its current traditions and practices appear to have evolved from harmonizing of many adhyatmic (spiritual?), social, and folk traditions.

The Holi celebration begins with a bonfire. The bonfire is started by collecting, from every house in the village, the accumulated trash, garbage, and waste. This clean-up act is the reminder of the necessity of cleaning all the physical, as well as mental, spaces where lots of polluting elements have grown out of our material nature, such as uncontrolled sensual desires, anger, delusion, hatred, lust, and greed. People gather around the bonfire and make offerings that might include roasting ears of new, still green barley crops which are still in the fields (this act is a kind of Vedic Yagna), and sing and dance around the fire, with songs, including the chants written in local vernacular. After all, this is New Year's day; a day to welcome the most colorful, joyful spring season-the king of all seasons.

In the Braj-Bhoomi, Holi playing is a battle of love. Young wives of the village are ready to attack the best man of the village with their sticks. The wealthiest Brahmin is chosen to become the "King of Holi," riding backward on a donkey, with a garland of shoes. Women from the lowest caste are ready to smear him with the filthiest of mud. In the afternoon, when all is cleaned up, it is time for colors; the wet and dry, all kinds. Everyone has been transfigured; no one is recognizable; the whole village appears to be in great social turmoil, chaos, craziness, jokes--yet everyone is in a state of great joy. The erotic mood is in full swing, yet within the expanded bounds of ethical norms. People are impersonating Shri Radha and Krishna; the roles have been reversed; the genders gone astray. This continues for a day or two, and then repurification and restructuring starts by washing, cleaning up, and donning new clothes.

This is a new beginning. Everyone greets one another with a new promise of cooperation, support, and love for the rest of the year. Radha-Krishna Bhajans (devotional songs) go on with joyful celebrations, with intense passion and love (Bhakti), after all, the Holi of Krishna is no mere intellectual exercise; no mere theory of love, no mere academic play: rather it is Divine Lila that each one of us must actively participate in and play our respective roles with great passion and joy.

The richness, variety, and beauty of Holi Colors are the metaphor for the colors and the moods of season and mind. The new beginning, the adhyatmic (spiritual?) renewal for a better future must start by smearing out and covering up all worldly distinctions and categories. The Holi celebration tends to transcend all the established differences and diversity of caste, color, sex, age, wealth, power, and attitudes. The social destruction and renewal, world pollution and repurification, smearing out the diversity to re-enact harmony and unity occur, not only on

intellectual planes but it is played out by each and everyone with great joy. After all, it is Holi of Krishna-the feast of harmony and divine/human love.

Charkula Dance:

The culmination of Holi festival takes place in the village Mukharai-the village of Radha's maternal grandmother, where the strong woman of the village performs a very unique circular dance of immense beauty, courage and ecstasy. The woman, who holds in balance on her head a huge load of about 100 pounds of flaming oil lamps filled with cotton seeds and sesame oil 108 in number arranged in circular pyramid of four tiers, dances on the rhythms of drums. The whole scene brings in the wonder and joy for the dancer, for the drum players, for the audience, as a Radha-Krishna's lila treasure, and to cherish in the memory till one eagerly waits for the following year to come.

Thus, the Braj-lilas go on and on and on, just like the process of universe, the process of world and the worldliness, but with a radical difference:

*“From age to age one essence, two names:
 The joy of bliss is Shyama (Radha)
 The bliss of joy is Shyam (Krishna).
 From all eternity manifest
 As two in a single form
 Two as one they come to Vrindaban,
 Radha-Krishna, Krishna-Radha,
 Ever and unchanging,
 Devastatingly beautiful.”*

Concluding Remarks:

This paper intends to conclude with some of my meditation on some of the hidden philosophical/scientific basis of Hindu world-views pertinent to pilgrimage.

All the parikramas or circumambulations are carried out by moving in the clockwise motion. This clockwise motion can also be seen in parikramas around the temples, around shrines, as well as, in moving the lighted lamp in circular motion in front of a deity while performing an act called arati. The basis for executing only clockwise motions in all such auspicious Hindu activities stem from the need of aligning them with the corresponding cosmological harmony and orders. In Northern Hemisphere, for us attached to our planet earth, the relative motion (relative to the earth) of sun appears to be clockwise around earth, although, we know now but it was already known and documented by the ancient Vedic cosmologist, that the earth moves counter clockwise on its own axis as well as around the stationary sun. Vedic Rishis living in India

(Northern Hemisphere) thus designed their system just to harmonize with the motions that can be defined and measured with reference to the moving earth.

Furthermore, the idea of circular motions and changes can be viewed as an unfoldment of a general Vedic framework that some of the primary motions and processes involved in the working of the universe are cyclic in nature. However, in general, the cyclic nature of changes and motions of each of the entities, or processes may not be the same. Thus, the world-view allows variations of various kinds. The existence of such cyclic motions as well as processes observed by modern scientific disciplines can be seen as a rediscovery of Hindu World-View. The examples include: the planetary motions, the change of seasons, cycles of birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death, and rebirth of many living entities, cycles of primary four ages (Yuga cycles), cyclic nature of civilizations-birth, growth, reaching peak, decay, and death. Many other natural processes within the earth atmosphere, as well as within many of the biological systems also follow their own cyclic/rhythmic motions. The Hindu seers/sages also recognize that the birth, growth, sustenance, decay, and death of human body leading to its rebirth is also a cyclic process which goes on and on till one reaches the state of Moksha or liberation, or complete freedom from “Prakritic” (material?) entanglement-that happens due to karmic field of activities attached to fruits of actions- of an eternal, self existing, non-mutable, blissful entity called, “Atman”. This has to be noted, however, that the non-cyclic linear motions and changes can and must be recognized and approximated only as particular and/or special subsets of the cyclic processes.

At the completion of a circular journey of the Ban Yatra, a pilgrim is supposed to be intentionally moved closure to achieving the state of bliss, or state of ananda, or bhakti-rasa, or Krishna’s proximity, although, he or she has returned back only to his or her original place where he or she began from: it means that there has been no net movement in the physical space. Therefore, one can conclude, that although there has not been real movement in physical space, a pilgrim has already moved inward in a kind of converging spiral motion toward enlightenment ultimately leading to actual participation in Krishna’s divine lilas, and the experience of ultimate rasa-bhava, above and beyond the moksha or libration. And, therefore, a pilgrim no matter how powerful and/or qualified may be as yogi or ascetic, must become a gopi first before he or she can enter into the most sacred divine space of Radha-Krishna lila.

Pilgrimage to Varanasi vs. Pilgrimage to Braj:

This meditation of mine intends to focus on seemingly two different ultimate goals of human life in Hindu traditions, and they appear to be represented by two different pilgrimages: one for Varanasi-the abode of Lord Shiva, who is also the greatest ascetic as well as Vaishnava, according to the Gopishvar episode and Bhagavat Mahapurana-the jewel of crown for all the Vaishnava traditions-and the second for Braj-the home of Krishna and Radha, the Supreme divine couple and their most intimate lila players.

‘Asceticism’ or ‘tapas’ represents the renunciation and the negation of worldly life and worldly desires, just for achieving the pure state of divine ananda or eternal bliss. In other words, the seekers are willing to subject themselves to a set of strict practices of austerity-physical as well

as mental, first to control and eventually to achieve annihilation of all kinds of worldly desires, and then to achieve the state existence known as a 'samadhi', in yogic terminology. This represents an undifferentiated state of Being-the experience of true, eternal being-Atman-Brahman. The entire manifold world and its worldliness lose completely their existential meanings for a seeker reaching the state of Brahman. This state is also called moksha, or the liberation from the entangled reams of worldly experiences and karmic fields. Lord Shiva as a formless, undifferentiated divine entity, 'lingam' represents such a state of Samadhi. Thus pilgrimage, or more appropriately tirtha-yatra to Varanasi represents the efforts of ultimately achieving moksha through the process of renunciation and asceticism.

Ban-Yatra to Braj, on the other hand, is aimed not to ultimately get to the state of Samadhi, or moksha, but get to the state above and beyond, so that it allows eternal participation in the divine lilas of Radha-Krishna that are being played out continuously in the Brajbhoomi, in their own home. The longing for this state of being can be seen through the story of Shiva: how he became the Gopisvara-Lord who is a gopi, and the Lord of gopis- (narrated earlier). This Yatra does require a kind of austerity and asceticism, not to negate or annihilate the worldly desires, but to acquire a radical inner transformation so that the world and its all kinds of worldliness can be viewed and experienced as the Krishna's lilas; and the pilgrims must become also the active participants in this divine lila. In other words, the pilgrims intend to achieve a state of inner transformation-what one can characterize as the 'gopi-bhava'-through which all their worldly activities and aims, including moksha can get the radical new meaning and vision-the vision that while acting within this world, all the interior as well exterior world, with all its complexities and paradoxes are nothing but the multidimensional manifestation of their most beloved Krishna himself, yet paradoxically he himself remains transcendently situated, playing his eternally blissful (Rasomaya) lila.

The legends and stories about the Radha-Krishna and their lila-activities performed in the Braj are understood and accepted as the real facts, but hidden within the higher dimensions, and not as the myths, or false, or flights of poetic imagination. Their continuous presence in the Braj has been witnessed and documented by all kinds of pilgrims for centuries. It is worthwhile to narrate one such encounter of David Haberman-a professor and researcher-with Krishna, when he took this journey in the late eighties. This incident took place at the pond, "Prema Sarobar", during a sunny hot season day. One day during his long Braj-yatra, he walked out from his group of pilgrims and sat down to relax on the meditation platform on the northern side of the pond. A fellow pilgrim following him to the platform instructed him to look into the pond, but to do so with your "lila eyes", and not with your "research eyes". Confused by this advice, Haberman bent down on the platform and refocused his attention on the random patterns being produced by the crests and valleys of the ripples formed in the water due to breeze. Suddenly, a whole new, unexpected world emerged within the pond.

"I was looking at a dense forest of flowering trees in which stood a woman and a man. She had a golden complexion and was dressed in a blue sari; he was a dark color and wore a yellow dhoti. She had flowers braided into her long black hair; he wore a garland of flowers around his neck and had a peacock stuck in his hair. They stood facing each other, tense, trembling slightly. They stood facing each other, hesitant, as if meeting for the first time. But their suggested that they

longed for the same thing. Slowly, he reached out a vulnerable hand and touched her. She surrendered to his advance and all certainly dissolved. The two embraced and suddenly the image was gone. Once again I was looking at the surface of the pond.... I was shaken and sat on the platform.”[11]

This paper and lecture will remain incomplete and devoid of ultimate joy without a closing remark: that Shri Radha is the ultimate perfection of Rasa, and the final answer to the human quest-existential, philosophical, and theological:

*“Essence of beauty and rasa,
Quintessence of bliss and compassion,
Epitome of artfulness, graceful in love.
May my mind take refuge in Radha,
Quintessence of all essences.”*

Glossary:

Ananda: Literally “bliss”, one of the goals of pilgrimage.

Arati: An act of worship/offering involving the waving of lighted lamp in a clockwise, Circular motion before a deity

Bhagavata Purana: The central Vaishnava scripture narrating the story of Krishna

Bhava: A state of being directing the emotional state toward higher perception of reality

Gopi: A female cowherd lover of Krishna. The most exemplary devotee of Krishna; qualified to Experience the divine rasa-bhava of Krishna’s lila

Kama: A field of desires

Rasa-lila: A divine dance of Krishna and gopis in circular motion

Samadhi: A state of yogic trance; also a tomb of a saint

Tirtha: A sacred place to “cross over” from worldly entanglement

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